

SECOND ED



DAME STEPHANIE SHIRLEY  
**LET IT GO**

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Dame Stephanie Shirley

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## 1: A Strange Journey

My earliest memory of England is of Liverpool Street station. It was a grey day in July, a few weeks before the outbreak of World War II. I'm not sure if it was raining as I stumbled from train to platform, or, indeed, what time of day it was. All I remember is the shadows, and the great cast iron pillars and walkways, and the pain in my foot.

I was five years old. My nine-year-old sister and I had been travelling for more than two days, on a grim, tearful journey from Vienna. We knew scarcely half a dozen words of English between us, and I, at least, had only the vaguest idea of where we were going and why.

There were about 1,000 of us on the train: all Jewish; all children – apart from two young women charged with looking after us all; and nearly all distraught. We had numbered tickets hanging around our necks as if we were lost property. In a sense, we were.

Two-and-a-half days earlier, we had all said goodbye to our parents (in my case, just my mother) for what was, for most of us, the last time. We were among the last – and I was almost the youngest – of around 10,000 child refugees who were saved from Hitler's terror by that great gamble of hope and despair that came to be known as the Kindertransport. For much of the previous year, millions of Jews in Germany and Austria (and, later, Czechoslovakia and Poland) had been struggling to come to terms with the once unthinkable truth that the civilized nations in which their lives were rooted had descended into deadly barbarism. Many resigned themselves to staying put and hoping for the best, but others calculated – correctly – that staying put was equivalent to signing their families' death warrants. Yet the rest of the world had largely closed its borders to refugees. So when a coalition of concerned groups in the UK formed the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany – later known as the Refugee Children's Movement – and gained official permission for up to 10,000 Jewish children to be admitted as refugees, some families, including mine, decided that they had no choice but to send their children away to Britain to be fostered.

It is almost impossible, from the comfort and safety of today, to imagine the mental agonies that such parents must have endured. Extraordinary leaps of faith and imagination would have been required

- faith in the kindness of unseen strangers but also imagination of what Nazism must ultimately lead to. Unbearable pangs of doubt and regret must have followed.

For us children, it was simpler. Our lives - as we had known them - were coming to an end when they had scarcely begun.

Not all of us realized the full awfulness of what was happening, as our families voluntarily dissolved themselves. I suspect that most of the parents had scarcely faced up to the full truth themselves, let alone spoken unambiguously about it to their children. But the sense of bereavement on the platform in Vienna had been overwhelming. There were enough wailing adults, never mind howling children, to make a mockery of those who were trying to put a brave face on it. Maybe there were a few of us who really believed that we were being sent off on a nice adventure. But it was hard not to see the truth in the grown-ups' eyes.

Perhaps I should have been grateful for the pain in my foot. Most of my fellow passengers had nothing to distract them from the pain of being sent away. But I was too miserable to be interested in anyone else. I had grazed a big toe a few days earlier, and the wound had somehow become infected. Now, with each passing hour, the dull, throbbing ache became more tormenting. Perhaps it masked the ache of separation, or perhaps the two aches have merged in my memory.

It is hard, after all these years, to be certain how many of the remembered details of the journey are real and how much I have added to my mental picture from other sources. Was the weather outside really grey? Or have I just seen too many black-and-white photographs of the Kindertransport? Did one boy keep getting out to be sick during the train's many unscheduled pauses? Or was that just a dream?

I am pretty certain that children slept on the floor as well as on the long wooden benches that lined the sides of the carriages; there were some large strips of corrugated cardboard that they used as mattresses. I presume that I slept too, although I cannot remember doing so. I think our parents had given us sandwiches for the journey; but, again, I may be wrong.

But I do know that they had given us presents (in my case, two tiny model dogs, joined together on a miniature leash) which we were forbidden to open until the train was moving - making us heartlessly

eager for the journey to begin. I know, too, that I clung grimly for most of the journey to my favourite doll.

I remember many stops, and occasional frightening interruptions from uniformed guards. I recall vividly the cold, oily smell of the sea - an entirely new experience - when we eventually reached the Channel (presumably at the Hook of Holland); and I vaguely remember a nauseous crossing in a cabin below deck. I am certain that, at some point in the train journey, children slept on the long overhead luggage racks - although the scene in my mind's eye is quite different from the carriage interiors I have since seen in archive photographs. And I doubt that there is much wrong with my impression that there was scarcely a moment in those two-and-a-half days of travelling when our miseries were not exacerbated by the jarring sound of other people's crying.

But what about my sense that, when we finally arrived at Liverpool Street, the platform was silent? It seems somehow implausible, and perhaps I have merely projected the numbness of my emotions on to the past. None the less, that is how my mind has preserved it: we spilled out on to the platform, speechless and wide-eyed, as if in a dream. Most of us were wearing hats and overcoats. We were allowed to bring only as much luggage as we could carry, and so our parents - desperate that we should not go cold or ragged in the strange new world to which they were banishing us - had packed our little cases to bursting-point and then flung a few extra garments on to us for good measure. Our coats still bore the yellow stars we had been forced to have sewn on to them in Austria.

The slow river of exhausted, bewildered, tear-stained faces flowed noiselessly down the platform. Renate (my sister) and I found ourselves in a huge, high, cavernous hall - now long-since demolished - where, after a quick roll-call, we waited for our new families. There were piles of palliasses - big bags filled with straw - heaped up against one of the walls, and the air was sickly with the smell of unwashed children.

None of us had any idea what to expect. The RCM had simply advertised in various British newspapers for families who were willing to foster a refugee child or two, and Renate and I knew nothing about the couple who had volunteered to take us in beyond their names. Every now and then adults would hurry past and say things, and occasionally announcements were made, but the strange language

meant nothing to us. Our father had, at the last minute, taught us a handful of English phrases, but they were bizarre and random things such as "windscreen wiper" and "slow combustion stove". I had no idea how to ask to go to the toilet, let alone how to understand strangers' explanations about what was going to happen to us.

The afternoon wore on. Renate and I sat on a palliasse at the back and watched as more and more children were led away, usually in ones or twos. No one seemed to protest when confronted with their new parents. Perhaps they were too tired and scared to do so. Or perhaps I was too absorbed in my own miseries to notice.

I don't know how long we sat there. Eventually, however, Renate and I were summoned. We were led outside by a serious-looking, gruff-voiced, middle-aged man in dark clothes. The streets seemed strange and dirty compared with Vienna. A big red Morris car was parked nearby, with a middle-aged lady, wearing lots of make-up, waiting in the passenger-seat.

We all got in, and drove off to our new life.

The journey, which lasted several hours, could not have been more miserable. We were tired, hungry and traumatised. Our new parents, who went by the name of Guy and Ruby Smith, spoke no German, so conversation was impossible. Meanwhile, it had just dawned on me that, in addition to my other woes, I had somehow managed to lose my precious doll. I am told that I howled my heart out for the entire journey.

Was it really the doll that bothered me? Or had its loss become a symbol of everything else we had lost? I cannot be certain: not after so much time. But I am sure of one thing. This was not really (as it seemed then) an ending. It was a beginning. This was the moment when, to all intents and purposes, my life began.

I have done more in the seven decades since that miserable day than I would ever have believed possible. I have achieved undreamt of riches – and given most of them away. I have built a global business empire, founded schools and institutes, dined with heads of state and exchanged ideas with some of the most brilliant minds of our time. I have been involved in pioneering achievements in business, science, medicine, academia and philanthropy. I have, I hope, changed many hundreds of lives – perhaps more – for the better. I have achieved fame and influence and am in the fortunate position of being able to do

more or less what I like with my own life while also being able to make a difference to the wider life of the nation.

I have, in short, been extraordinarily lucky.

I have known failure and heartbreak as well as success, but I have never quite lost sight of two life-defining ideas – both of which I can trace back to my arrival in England all those years ago as a terrified, weeping child refugee.

The first is the conviction that even in the blackest moments of despair there is hope, if one can find the courage to pursue it. Sometimes the worst is less overwhelmingly awful than we fear; sometimes the right attitude can create good even from life's most terrible situations..

My second big idea is the matching conviction that, even though I ostensibly lost everything when my parents were forced to send me away, I was not just the victim of bigotry and cruelty. I was also the fortunate beneficiary of the unearned generosity of many people: the Jewish and Christian activists who set up the Kindertransport, the Quakers who kept the project going when it ran out of money, the ordinary people who chipped in with the various tedious administrative tasks that allowed the project to function, the Catholic nuns who helped to educate me, and the quiet, middle-aged, nominally Anglican couple who took me in.

Without my being fully aware of what was going on or why, a large number of good-natured strangers took it upon themselves to save my life. It took me some years to digest this fact and its implications. But, once I had, a simple resolution took root deep in my heart: I had to make sure that mine was a life that had been worth saving.

I may not always have succeeded in this aim. But I have at least learnt lessons along the way: about how to make things happen, how to deal with setbacks and how to turn the most improbable dreams into realities.

If I now presume to write this account of some of my life's defining episodes, it is because I believe that these lessons – the lessons life has taught me – are worth sharing.

It has, at any rate, been an unusual life.

## 2: My Lost World

My life wasn't supposed to be interesting. I began it in a respectable, well-off family in Dortmund, Germany. The four of us lived in a nice town-house in a fashionable part of the city, with two live-in servants, and Renate went to school with the children of other prosperous bourgeois families.

If all had gone according to plan I would have remained in that comfortable world indefinitely. I would have married a nice professional man and raised a similar family myself. It is unlikely that I would ever have had a meaningful job. But the shadows had been gathering since shortly before my birth, and my time as a member of the leisured Westphalian bourgeoisie turned out to be so short that today I can scarcely remember it.

My mother was beautiful but brittle: the younger daughter of a wealthy gentile family in Krems, in Austria, who had educated her to be a middle-class wife. She had never worked – beyond a little dress-making that she pursued more as a hobby than as a business – and put her energy instead into fussing about appearances. She was always immaculately turned-out, and so were we. Yet she usually seemed discontented, as if she had wanted something quite different from life.

My father was a high court judge: a brilliant but rather distant man. I think he was almost a genius – but maybe a bit autistic too. A coffee-importer's son, he was a gifted violinist who spoke seven languages and had the most extraordinary memory. He could recite railway timetables by heart – and, to our embarrassment, sometimes did.

But he was also charming and had a quality of absolute integrity: a single-minded devotion to principle that was slightly unworldly but also, sometimes, slightly inhuman. I have a vivid early memory of going for a family walk in some semi-rural setting – presumably one of Dortmund's famous parks – and stamping, for some reason, on a beetle. My father exploded into a blazing fury. "How would you like it if someone stamped on you?" he shouted. It was an extraordinary rage, really, to direct at a mere toddler. Yet he did get his point through to me.

I also remember him suffering occasional bouts of violent vomiting. I later learnt that these were connected with the ghastliest aspect of his

job: like all German judges at the time, he was required to witness the execution of anyone he sentenced to death. I'm not sure if the sickness occurred before or after the events (which were mercifully rare); but the memory shows that he did not take his responsibility lightly.

I think he imagined that his incorruptibility would enable him to fight the evils of Nazism, but the tide of evil proved too strong. He had been a rising star of his profession, becoming a judge shortly after his thirtieth birthday (that is, in 1930). But by the time I was born – on 16 September 1933 – career doors were starting to be closed in his face, partly because of his Jewishness and partly because of his open contempt for National Socialism. Again and again, we were forced to move – from city to city and eventually from country to country – in search of work and security. By the time I was five we had lived in seven different European countries. Of these, I dimly remember Germany, Italy and Hungary; and Austria, where we eventually settled on the outskirts of Vienna.

We had a nice home there – a big, square town-house at the top of a hill in the leafy suburb of Perchtoldsdorf, near the Vienna Woods – and my father had work for a while. But the Nazi plague soon infected Austria as well – the Anschluss annexed Austria into the Third Reich on 12 March 1938 – and by my fifth birthday, a few weeks before Kristallnacht, the writing was on the wall for anyone who dared to read it: Jewish families who stayed in Central Europe faced catastrophe.

One of my clearest memories of Perchtoldsdorf is of walking to fetch my sister from school; I particularly remember a huge stone wall – like the side of a giant's castle – that lined part of our route. Years later, I discovered two things about this memory. First, the wall wasn't huge at all. (I learnt this when I revisited the city a few years after the war.) More importantly, there was a reason why we were going to collect my sister. It was because, even as a nine-year-old, she was beginning to suffer from the kind of violent anti-Semitism that was about to overwhelm us all. She was lucky enough to have a kind teacher, who used to let her out early so that she could get home – under escort – without being stoned by her fellow pupils.

I imagine that it was my father – with his habit of interpreting the world with his head rather than his heart – who first faced up to the unthinkable reality that the once solid social framework in which our

lives had been built had collapsed, leaving a choice between escape and eventual extinction.

It was 1939 by then, and country after country was closing its borders to refugees. But we had some remote family in America, and it seemed possible that, with their help, we might end up there. Time was running out, however, and my parents' immediate priority was to protect their children. When they heard about the Kindertransport, they decided that Renate and I should be sent to safety.

I was too young to suspect what this desperate decision must have meant to them. Later on, I would feel guilty about this – just as I would feel guilty about a lot of things that can hardly have been my fault. The fact was, these were troubled times, and ours was already a troubled family.

My mother had had high hopes of her life. Pretty, clever and well-educated, she had married well: my father was not only brilliant and handsome when she met him but cultured and well-connected – with a circle of sophisticated friends that would later include Georg Solti, the great conductor – and he had dazzling career prospects. I think she entertained visions of being a lady of leisure, hosting a glittering salon in which clever people played music and discussed philosophy. Instead, she found herself uprooted and persecuted, with a husband whose prospects diminished by the day. Not being Jewish herself, she blamed my father for her misfortunes. Yet their relationship had been in trouble even before the Nazis came to power: I was once told that I had been “the child to save the marriage”. If this was true, it was not a role that I performed very successfully. I was largely brought up by nurses, and I have little memory of my mother being loving or maternal towards me. Instead, in my mental images of my early childhood, Mutti – as we called her – is always displeased with me.

But I must not be unfair. No one who has not been in such a position themselves can judge parents for their reactions to the intolerable pressures placed on them by a poisonous dictatorship. Perhaps, if we had stayed together, I would remember my parents with more affection. The fact that we did not was not their fault. On the contrary, it reflected their concern for our well-being.

The Kindertransport trains had been running for about six months when the decision was taken to send us away. Time and funds were running out. But it was not a simple matter. Forms had to be filled

in, documents stamped, permits queued for at inconvenient times, guarantees provided. We spent several weeks in a children's home – of which I remember little beyond the fact that it had a large indoor swing on one of the landings – while my mother devoted herself full-time to grappling with the obstacles of Nazi and British bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, there was the scarcely less urgent problem to be addressed of finding a way for my parents to escape too – and, if possible, for the family to be reunited. The difficulty was identifying a place that would accept us. The Refugee Children's Movement had found Renate and me a foster family in England who were prepared to guarantee, with £50 of their own money, that we would not be a burden on the state. But with millions of would-be refugees seeking safe havens from Nazi Europe, and with the Nazis making it all but impossible for them to take any wealth with them, most adults had no choice but to remain where they were, irrespective of the dangers they faced.

Renate and I left Vienna eight weeks before the outbreak of war. A few weeks earlier, my father had escaped over the mountains to Switzerland on foot, like the von Trapp family in *The Sound of Music*. The Gestapo had visited our house a few days earlier, and he must have realised that he was in imminent danger of arrest; but I think the idea may also have been that, with him gone, my mother could be freed from the handicap of being considered Jewish or anti-Nazi.

If so, it was a good strategy. Unlike most of the parents who sent their children away on the Kindertransport, mine survived. While Renate and I were struggling to find our feet in our strange new world, our parents both managed their own desperate journeys to England. My father got there before us – I have a strange memory that he actually appeared for a few moments while we were being collected from Liverpool Street – but was soon interned as an enemy alien and in due course transported to Australia, where he remained until 1941, subsequently joining the Pioneer Corps in the UK and, much later, becoming attached to the US army in Germany.

My mother was able to escape by train – apparently on the basis that she was an ordinary Austrian with ordinary travelling rights. She was more inclined than my father to fit in, sometimes even wearing a swastika to avoid drawing attention to herself. None the less, she had no intention of staying behind without her family, and, when she

fled, she had to leave behind everything that she possessed. When she eventually reached England she was penniless, homeless, jobless and stateless. It would be a long time before we heard from her again.

Meanwhile, in a small village in the English Midlands, Renate and I were already beginning to forget the wide avenues of the central European cities which had hitherto formed the backdrop to our world. Instead, we were absorbing the unfamiliar rhythms of a new culture and a new language – and, in effect, a whole new life.

Those early pre-English days now seem almost unreal to me, as if they belonged to someone else's memories. As an adult, on at least one occasion, I have given my date of birth on an official form as July 1939: an entirely subconscious slip with an obvious explanation.

Looking back today, from the other end of a life that has been exceptionally rich in nearly every sense, I can see that most of my subsequent achievements can be traced back to that unnatural separation. It marked the beginning of a narrative far more interesting than the one that had originally been scripted for me. But it also taught me, with the ending of my first life, a profound lesson: that few things in life are as solid as they seem; that tomorrow will not always resemble today; and that wholesale change, though often terrifying, is not necessarily synonymous with catastrophe.

### 3: England, My England

My new life in England began badly. Our foster parents, Guy and Ruby Smith, had no experience of child-raising and seemed to be as taken aback as we were by the gulf between our cultures. They were a middle-aged, conventional couple, set in their ways, who had read about our plight in a local newspaper. "Two sisters," the advertisement had said, under pictures of Renate and me, "brought up in a nice family. Will somebody give them a home?" You can imagine the horrified doubts they must have harboured during their first days as custodians of the real, flesh-and-blood sisters in question: two strange, bewildered children, one of whom – Renate – was becoming withdrawn and sullen while the other – me – scarcely stopped crying.

The Smiths lived in the West Midlands, in a village called Little Aston, now a prosperous suburb of Sutton Coldfield but in those days quite modest and rural. Their home, called Northways, was an unremarkable detached house, solid and relatively new – but also barer and colder than anything we were used to. There had obviously never been children in it.

Renate and I shared a small double room, with nothing in it apart from a double bed (which we would divide down the middle by a bolster); a dressing table (with a black ebony tray on it bearing matching hand-mirror, hairbrush and comb); and a rather unsettling portrait of Ruby's father on the wall. It was perfectly comfortable, but it was hard, on those first strange nights, not to fear that life in our nice new home was going to be a grim ordeal.

Yet things improved surprisingly quickly. Shortly after our arrival, Ruby, having failed to mollify me over the loss of my doll with soothing words that I could not understand, disappeared for an hour or two and returned with a gift: a rag doll. It was a pretty disastrous piece of needlework, to be honest: just a couple of dusters badly sewn together. But as a childcare tactic it must have worked, because I kept Kate – as I called her – for at least a decade and was devastated when she was eventually thrown away.

Not long afterwards, I developed measles. This was no laughing matter then, and death must have seemed a real possibility. But Ruby, horrified at the thought of losing one of the children who had been



*This formal portrait of Renate and I was done immediately prior to our leaving Vienna on a Kindertransport.*

entrusted to her, nursed me assiduously, and, in due course, I pulled through. I don't know how effective her practical ministrations were, but her obvious, tearful concern and tireless attention helped to create a bond between us. Before long, I was settled quite happily in my new home.

Guy and Ruby could hardly have been more different from my own parents. Neither was very educated – Guy had left school at 14 – and there was nothing intellectual or cosmopolitan about them. They owned half-a-dozen records and a library of perhaps 20 books. Yet they were, in their stolid way, a lovely couple.

Guy was in his mid-forties, the managing director of a small light engineering firm in which he had started out, three decades earlier, as an apprentice. He was hard-working but wonderfully solid: firm, loving, consistent and calm. He had done well for himself but never talked about work when he came home – and never betrayed the slightest sign of any stress he might have been feeling. Instead, he went about his domestic duties in a patient, methodical way, radiating reassurance to those around him – especially children and animals.

Ruby was more of a flibbertigibbet: an impulsive, highly strung, romantic woman who had married Guy on the rebound and often told him so. There was something slightly ridiculous about her: she was brittle, self-centred, hopeless in the house, with a "mutton dressed as lamb" approach to clothes. She was also rather snobbish, with more interest in appearance than in substance. Yet there was a genuine warmth inside her that her foibles could not stifle. It had been her idea that they should take us in; and it was she, I think, who was first to love us.

Renate found it hard to love her back. I remember her getting desperately upset when Ruby insisted that she brush her hair in a different way from the one she was used to. Another time, there was a huge row involving Renate's use of butter. I never grasped the details – only the fact that, for Renate, it was a mortal affront to be forced to do things differently. Little physical foibles and habits are part of what defines families, and Renate – who had inhabited the world of our family for nearly twice as long as I had – felt almost violated by the requirement to adopt different habits. (In later life, when I learnt about the experiences of other Kindertransport children, I realised that she

had been far from alone in this. Almost invariably, it was the older children who had found it hardest to settle.)

Despite the tears, however, we grew used to our new world. We called Guy and Ruby "Uncle" and "Auntie", which is how I have thought of them ever since. They in turn called me "Pickles". My actual name, I should add, was Vera: Vera Buchthal. (I adopted Stephanie, hitherto my middle name, when I was 18, along with the anglicised surname of Brook. The Steve and the Shirley came later, for reasons that will become clear in due course.) Renate was nicknamed "Bob" – a reference to her hairstyle – but never took to it and soon became Renate again.

Within a couple of months, we were deemed to have learnt enough English to be capable of being educated. So we were enrolled at the little village school, down Forge Lane. It was near enough for us to be able to walk there – just a few minutes across the fields – and near enough, too, for Ruby to observe through binoculars what went on in the playground. (When Renate learnt that she had been doing this, there was another furious row.)

The children at school were friendly enough, with none of the anti-Semitism that had blighted Renate's earlier schooldays. Outsiders were not uncommon in rural England: more than 800,000 schoolchildren had been evacuated to the countryside because of the risk of urban bombing. And, in any case, the headmistress, a formidable lady called Miss Proud, would never have tolerated bullying.

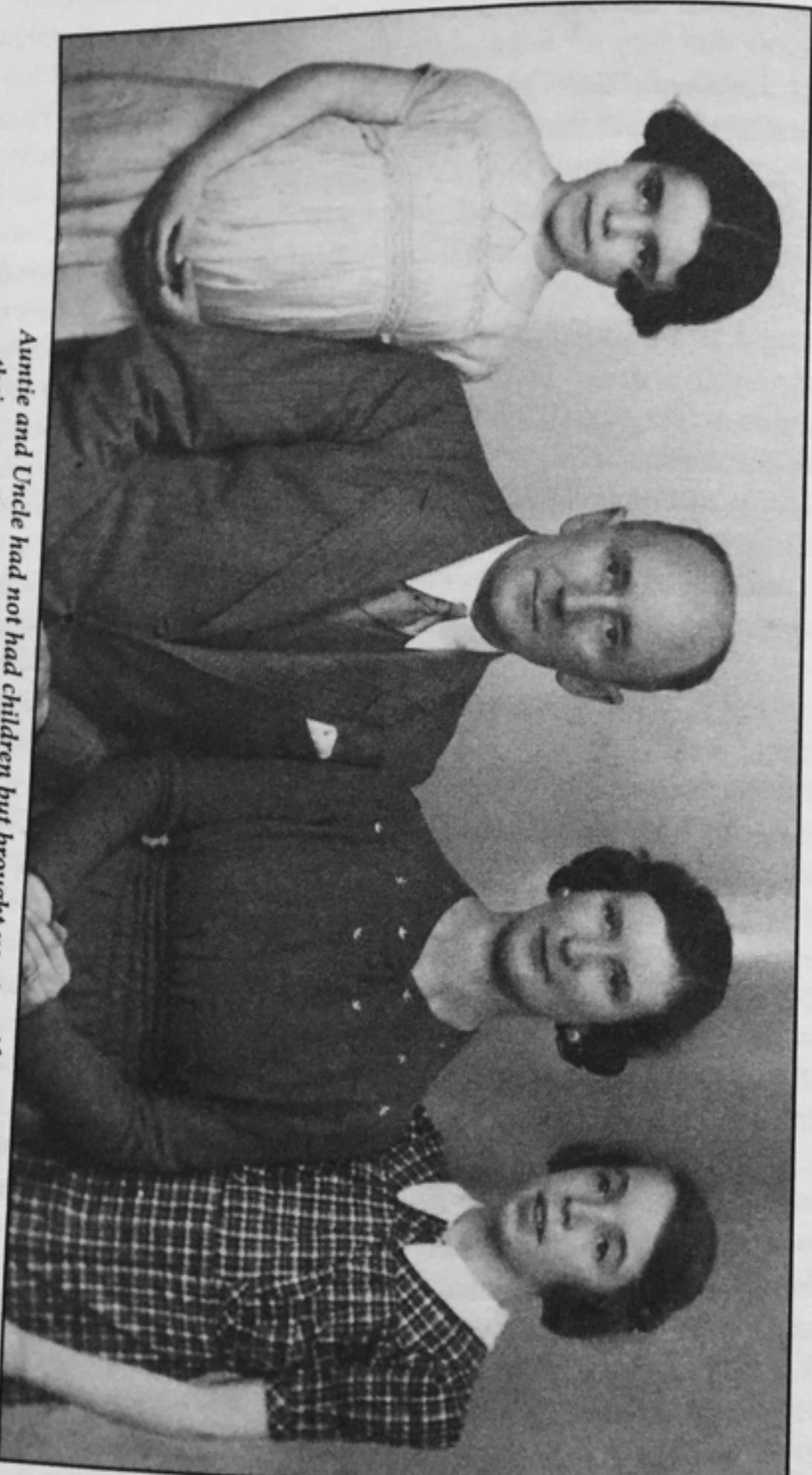
But although we enjoyed school, it was the atmosphere at home that I remember most vividly. Even with Renate's unhappiness, and Auntie's volatility, there was something very calm, and very nurturing, about that household. Auntie and Uncle had clear ideas as to how children should be brought up. Some of these, which I attribute to Auntie, were superficial: we were supposed to wear little gloves when we went out, for example, and she was very keen on table manners. But most of them involved traditional, almost Victorian values. We had to do the housework before we were allowed to go out and play, and Uncle was always quoting the kind of sayings that were commonplace among respectable people in those days, such as "Waste not, want not" or "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well." It may have been a rather clichéd outlook, but most of it sunk in – and I am glad that it did.

Both were patriotic – Uncle had fought in the Great War – and this rubbed off on me too. The handful of 78rpm gramophone records that they owned consisted largely of tunes such as "Pomp and Circumstance", "Rule Britannia", "Jerusalem" and Purcell's "Trumpet Voluntary" (tunes that still move me), and they believed strongly that everyone had a duty to their country. Sometimes they would have friends round to play whist, and, when they did, we would listen to their grown-up conversation. A recurrent theme was the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936. When I first had the story explained to me, I thought: how romantic, he gave up the throne for the woman he loved. But the grown-ups insisted that this wasn't the point. "Yes," Uncle would say, "but he didn't do his duty." He said it with such certainty that I was eventually persuaded. Even now, I can never quite shake off the idea that, somehow, you always have to do your duty – otherwise you are letting yourself down.

Auntie and Uncle were comfortably off, but our life was austere by modern standards, largely because of the war. Food was rationed, and we would never do anything like, say, buying clothes. (My mother, not wanting to put our foster family to any avoidable expense, had sent after us a trunk packed with clothes. Some were for me to wear straight away and some were for me to grow into; others, similarly, were for Renate to wear straight away or for her to grow into. Both of Renate's sets would then be handed down to me. By the time I had grown out of all four sets – all of which looked embarrassingly foreign – the war would be almost over.)

We spent a lot of time being cold. The boiler was switched on once a week, briefly, so that we could have a bath, and I have painful memories of the vividly mottled shins that resulted from standing too close to the fire – when we had one – trying to warm up.

It was a much more rural life than anything we had known before: walking to and from school through the fields, playing among the sweet-smelling bluebells in the woods, or helping Uncle in the vegetable garden he had made by digging up his long back lawn – these were all new and rather delightful experiences. Uncle used to push me around in a big wooden wheelbarrow, or just chat to me in his slow, matter-of-fact way as he dug up his root vegetables, in which he took great pride. (We ate a lot of beetroot.) I grew to love the reassuring smell of his pipe smoke, and the approaching purr of his car when he



*Auntie and Uncle had not had children but brought us up as if we were their own. Renate did not settle easily but I am totally their child.*

came back from work. Sometimes we would rush out on to the lane to meet him and ride the last few yards of his journey on his running board.

At Christmas, we went to stay with Uncle's parents – whom we called Large Uncle and Little Auntie – in a tiny cottage in Bromley Wood, near Abbots Bromley in east Staffordshire. This was truly rural. They had no gas, no electricity, no running water: just the patient, plodding power of their own incessant labour. To a child's eye it seemed idyllic: a magical pocket of ancient country life that had somehow survived into the 20th century. You could pump water from the yard, but the water from up in the village tasted nicer. I can still see today the image of Large Uncle going to collect water with a yoke over his shoulders, with a bucket on each end.

As 1940 unfolded, we became more aware of the war. The Germans began to bomb Birmingham, which was near enough for a decoy "factory" to have been built in a field not far from Little Aston. It looked like a mass of chicken huts on their sides, all lit up, and was supposed to look like the target factories in Birmingham. It only ever attracted one bomb. People joked that the German pilots knew all about it and used it simply as a landmark from which to take their bearings for the real Birmingham.

But air raids were taken seriously. Uncle, who was an Air Raid Protection warden, had dug a large shelter into the garden, big enough both for us and for the neighbours. There were plenty of alarms, and I have many memories – all blurred into one – of being lifted out of bed and carried half-sleeping down to the shelter. But I don't remember feeling frightened.

The other thing that was curiously absent – at least in my memory – was anxiety about what had become of my parents. As a five-year-old, one adapts and forgets quickly. But we did have reason to believe that they were both alive – and an early letter from my father in which he said that he had heard nothing from Mutti for a long time and assumed that she was "lost" was, I think, kept from us until later. The Red Cross ran a wonderful communication service that allowed people to send five-word telegrams across the war-torn continent. Every few months, one would arrive from our grandmother, who lived in the Netherlands. Most just said things such as: "Hope well. Be good. Granny." But she also tried to keep us – or our foster parents – abreast of what was